interzone

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ◊ ISSUE 218 ◊ OCT 2008 ◊ £3.75

Chris Beckett

Hannu Rajaniemi
David Moles
& Lavie Tidhar
Tim Lees

Charles Stross

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

This is a story about a cat and a dog and their undying devotion to their human master. It doesn't have anything in common with the family films you have seen. It is a masterpiece you have to listen to.

Cat with armor in the city of the dead. Dog chase after the Cat and a story told with epic esoteric language. The master was a god. The dog and the cat learn the master's words from the small animal in their dreams and set out on a mission to rescue their master.

The story is fantastic and make you interested in more, the world is a singularity one where humans have evolved and can make copies of their own minds. Unrestricted copy led to the creation of Plurals some of which evolved to transhuman civilizations out among the stars. Now human law limit every human to one copy at a time. The master breaks the law and is sentenced to a virtual prison. It's from there the animals have to rescue him.

The language in the story is poetic and it sounds fantastic coming from someone not born to the language.

The story hints on things that might be in Hannu's upcoming novel. There is a war going on among the stars and its there the small animal are going, to the Big Dogs.

The story is also amusing and fun imagine the dog become a musician to earn money and the cat had a gladiator career that lasted a while.

- His Master's Voice
  - ○

His Master's Voice
by Hannu Rajaniemi

Before the concert, we steal the master's head.

The necropolis is a dark forest of concrete mushrooms in the blue Antarctic night. We huddle inside the utility fog bubble attached to the steep southern wall of the nunatak, the ice valley.

The cat washes itself with a pink tongue. It reeks of infinite confidence.

"Get ready," I tell it. "We don't have all night."

It gives me a mildly offended look and dons its armor. The quantum dot fabric envelopes its striped body like living oil. It purrs faintly and tests the diamond-bladed claws against an icy outcropping of rock. The sound grates my teeth and the razor-winged butterflies in my belly wake up. I look at the bright, impenetrable firewall of the city of the dead. It shimmers like chained northern lights in my AR vision.

I decide that it's time to ask the Big Dog to bark.My helmet laser casts a one-nanosecond prayer of light at the indigo sky: just enough to deliver one quantum bit up there into the Wild. Then we wait. My tail wags and a low growl builds up in my belly.

Right on schedule, it starts to rain red fractal code. My augmented reality vision goes down, unable to process the dense torrent of information falling upon the necropolis firewall like monsoon rain. The chained aurora borealis flicker and vanish.

"Go!" I shout at the cat, wild joy exploding in me, the joy of running after the Small Animal of my dreams. "Go now!"

The cat leaps into the void. The wings of the armor open and grab the icy wind, and the cat rides the draft down like a grinning Chinese kite.

* * *

It's difficult to remember the beginning now. There were no words then, just sounds and smells: metal and brine, the steady drumming of waves against pontoons. And there were three perfect things in the world: my bowl, the Ball, and the Master's firm hand on my neck.

I know now that the Place was an old oil rig that the Master had bought. It smelled bad when we arrived, stinging oil and chemicals. But there were hiding places, secret nooks and crannies. There was a

helicopter landing pad where the Master threw the ball for me. It fell into the sea many times, but the Master's bots — small metal dragonflies — always fetched it when I couldn't.

The Master was a god. When he was angry, his voice was an invisible whip. His smell was a god-smell that filled the world.

While he worked, I barked at the seagulls or stalked the cat. We fought a few times, and I still have a pale scar on my nose. But we developed an understanding. The dark places of the rig belonged to the cat, and I reigned over the deck and the sky: we were the Hades and Apollo of the Master's realm.

But at night, when the Master watched old movies or listened to records on his old rattling gramophone we lay at his feet together. Sometimes the Master smelled lonely and let me sleep next to him in his small cabin, curled up in the god-smell and warmth.

It was a small world, but it was all we knew.

The Master spent a lot of time working, fingers dancing on the keyboard projected on his mahogany desk. And every night he went to the Room: the only place on the rig where I wasn't allowed.

It was then that I started to dream about the Small Animal. I remember its smell even now, alluring and inexplicable: buried bones and fleeing rabbits, irresistible.

In my dreams, I chased it along a sandy beach, a tasty trail of tiny footprints that I followed along bendy pathways and into tall grass. I never lost sight of it for more than a second: it was always a flash of white fur just at the edge of my vision.

One day it spoke to me.

"Come," it said. "Come and learn."

The Small Animal's island was full of lost places. Labyrinthine caves, lines drawn in sand that became words when I looked at them, smells that sang songs from the master's gramophone. It taught me, and I learned: I was more awake every time I woke up. And when I saw the cat looking at the spiderbots with a new awareness, I knew that it, too, went to a place at night.

I came to understand what the Master said when he spoke. The sounds that had only meant angry or happy before became the word of my god. He noticed, smiled, and ruffled my fur. After that he started speaking to us more, me and the cat, during the long evenings when the sea beyond the windows was black as oil and the waves made the whole rig ring like a bell. His voice was dark as a well, deep and gentle. He spoke of an island, his home, an island in the middle of a great sea. I smelled bitterness, and for the first time I understood that there were always words behind words, never spoken.

* * *

The cat catches the updraft perfectly: it floats still for a split second, and then clings to the side of the tower. Its claws put the smart concrete to sleep: code that makes the building think that the cat is a bird or a shard of ice carried by the wind.

The cat hisses and spits. The disassembler nanites from its stomach cling to the wall and start eating a round hole in it. The wait is excruciating. The cat locks the exomuscles of its armor and hangs there patiently. Finally, there is a mouth with jagged edges in the wall, and it slips in. My heart pounds as I switch from the AR view to the cat's iris cameras. It moves through the ventilation shaft like lightning, like an acrobat, jerky, hyperaccelerated movements, metabolism on overdrive. My tail twitches again. We are coming, master, I think. We are coming.

* * *

I lost my ball the day the wrong master came.

I looked everywhere. I spent an entire day sniffing every corner and even braved the dark corridors of the cat's realm beneath the deck, but I could not find it. In the end, I got hungry and returned to the cabin. And there were two masters. Four hands stroking my coat. Two gods, true and false.

I barked. I did not know what to do. The cat looked at me with a mixture of pity and disdain and rubbed itself on both of their legs.

"Calm down," said one of the masters. "Calm down. There are four of us now."

I learned to tell them apart, eventually: by that time Small Animal had taught me to look beyond smells and appearances. The master I remembered was a middle-aged man with graying hair, stocky-bodied. The new master was young, barely a man, much slimmer and with the face of a mahogany cherub. The master tried to convince me to play with the new master, but I did not want to. His smell was too familiar, everything else too alien. In my mind, I called him the wrong master.

The two masters worked together, walked together and spent a lot of time talking together using words I did not understand. I was jealous. Once I even bit the wrong master. I was left on the deck for the night as a punishment, even though it was stormy and I was afraid of thunder. The cat, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in the wrong master's company, and I hated it for it.

I remember the first night the masters argued.

"Why did you do it?" asked the wrong master.

"You know," said the master. "You remember." His tone was dark. "Because someone has to show them we own ourselves."

“So, you own me?” said the wrong master. “Is that what you think?”

“Of course not,” said the master. “Why do you say that?”

“Someone could claim that. You took a genetic algorithm and told it to make ten thousand of you, with random variations, pick the ones that would resemble your ideal son, the one you could love. Run until the machine runs out of capacity. Then print. It’s illegal, you know. For a reason.”

“That’s not what the plurals think. Besides, this is my place. The only laws here are mine.”

“You’ve been talking to the plurals too much. They are no longer human.”

“You sound just like VecTech’s PR bots.”

“I sound like you. Your doubts. Are you sure you did the right thing? I’m not a Pinocchio. You are not a Gepetto.”

The master was quiet for a long time.

“What if I am,” he finally said. “Maybe we need Gepettos. Nobody creates anything new anymore, let alone wooden dolls that come to life. When I was young, we all thought something wonderful was on the way. Diamond children in the sky, angels out of machines. Miracles. But we gave up just before the blue fairy came.”

“I am not your miracle.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You should at least have made yourself a woman,” said the wrong master in a knife-like voice. “It might have been less frustrating.”

I did not hear the blow, I felt it. The wrong master let out a cry, rushed out and almost stumbled on me. The master watched him go. His lips moved, but I could not hear the words. I wanted to comfort him and made a little sound, but he did not even look at me, went back to the cabin and locked the door. I scratched the door, but he did not open, and I went up to the deck to look for the Ball again.

* * *

Finally, the cat finds the master’s chamber.

It is full of heads. They float in the air, bodiless, suspended in diamond cylinders. The tower executes the command we sent into its drugged nervous system, and one of the pillars begins to blink. Master, master, I sing quietly as I see the cold blue face beneath the diamond. But at the same time I know it’s not the master, not yet.

The cat reaches out with its prosthetic. The smart surface yields like a soap bubble. “Careful now, careful,” I say. The cat hisses angrily

but obeys, spraying the head with preserver nanites and placing it gently into its gel-lined backpack.

The necropolis is finally waking up: the damage the heavenly hacker did has almost been repaired. The cat heads for its escape route and goes to quicktime again. I feel its staccato heartbeat through our sensory link.

It is time to turn out the lights. My eyes polarise to sunglass-black. I lift the gauss launcher, marvelling at the still tender feel of the Russian hand grafts. I pull the trigger. The launcher barely twitches in my grip, and a streak of light shoots up to the sky. The nuclear payload is tiny, barely a decaton, not even a proper plutonium warhead but a hafnium micronuke. But it is enough to light a small sun above the mausoleum city for a moment, enough for a focused maser pulse that makes it as dead as its inhabitants for a moment.

The light is a white blow, almost tangible in its intensity, and the gorge looks like it is made of bright ivory. White noise hisses in my ears like the cat when it's angry.

* * *

For me, smells were not just sensations, they were my reality. I know now that that is not far from the truth: smells are molecules, parts of what they represent.

The wrong master smelled wrong. It confused me at first: almost a god-smell, but not quite, the smell of a fallen god.

And he did fall, in the end.

I slept on the master's couch when it happened. I woke up to bare feet shuffling on the carpet and heavy breathing, torn away from a dream of the Little Animal trying to teach me the multiplication table.

The wrong master looked at me.

"Good boy," he said. "Ssh." I wanted to bark, but the godlike smell was too strong. And so I just wagged my tail, slowly, uncertainly. The wrong master sat on the couch next to me and srcratched my ears absently.

"I remember you," he said. "I know why he made you. A living childhood memory." He smiled and smelled frendlier than ever before. "I know how that feels." Then he sighed, got up and went into the Room. And then I knew that he was about to do something bad, and started barking as loudly as I could. The master woke up and when the wrong master returned, he was waiting.

"What have you done?" he asked, face chalk-white.

The wrong master gave him a defiant look. "Just what you'd have done. You're the criminal, not me. Why should I suffer? You don't

own me."

"I could kill you," said the master, and his anger made me whimper with fear. "I could tell them I was you. They would believe me."

"Yes," said the wrong master. "But you are not going to."

The master sighed. "No," he said. "I'm not."

* * *

I take the dragonfly over the cryotower. I see the cat on the roof and whimper from relief. The plane lands lightly. I'm not much of a pilot, but the lobotomised mind of the daimon — an illegal copy of a 21st Century jet ace — is. The cat climbs in, and we shoot towards the stratosphere at Mach 5, wind caressing the plane's quantum dot skin.

"Well done," I tell the cat and wag my tail. It looks at me with yellow slanted eyes and curls up on its acceleration gel bed. I look at the container next to it. Is that a wiff of the god-smell or is it just my imagination?

In any case, it is enough to make me curl up in deep happy dog-sleep, and for the first time in years I dream of the Ball and the Small Animal, sliding down the ballistic orbit's steep back.

* * *

They came from the sky before the sunrise. The master went up on the deck wearing a suit that smelled new. He had the cat in his lap: it purred quietly. The wrong master followed, hands behind his back.

There were three machines, black-shelled scarabs with many legs and transparent wings. They came in low, raising a white-frothed wake behind them. The hum of their wings hurt my ears as they landed on the deck.

The one in the middle vomited a cloud of mist that shimmered in the dim light, swirled in the air and became a black-skinned woman who had no smell. By then I had learned that things without a smell could still be dangerous, so I barked at her until the master told me to be quiet.

"Mr. Takeshi," she said. "You know why we are here."

The master nodded.

"You don't deny your guilt?"

"I do," said the master. "This raft is technically a sovereign state, governed by my laws. Autogenesis is not a crime here."

"This raft was a sovereign state," said the woman. "Now it

belongs to VecTech. Justice is swift, Mr. Takeshi. Our lawbots broke your constitution ten seconds after Mr. Takeshi here — " she nodded at the wrong master — "told us about his situation. After that, we had no choice. The WIPO quantum judge we consulted has condemned you to the slow zone for three hundred and fourteen years, and as the wronged party we have been granted execution rights in this matter. Do you have anything to say before we act?"

The master looked at the wrong master, face twisted like a mask of wax. Then he set the cat down gently and scratched my ears. "Look after them," he told the wrong master. "I'm ready."

The beetle in the middle moved, too fast for me to see. The master's grip on the loose skin on my neck tightened for a moment like my mother's teeth, and then let go. Something warm splattered on my coat and there was a dark, deep smell of blood in the air.

Then he fell. I saw his head in a floating soap bubble that one of the beetles swallowed. Another opened its belly for the wrong master. And then they were gone, and the cat and I were alone on the bloody deck.

* * *

The cat wakes me up when we dock with the Marquis of Carabas. The zeppelin swallows our dragonfly drone like a whale. It is a crystal cigar, and its nanospun sapphire spine glows faint blue. The Fast City is a sky full of neon stars six kilometers below us, anchored to the airship with elevator cables. I can see the liftspiders climbing them, far below, and sigh with relief. The guests are still arriving, and we are not too late. I keep my personal firewall clamped shut: I know there is a torrent of messages waiting beyond.

We rush straight to the lab. I prepare the scanner while the cat takes the master's head out very, very carefully. The fractal bush of the scanner comes out of its nest, molecule-sized disassembler fingers bristling. I have to look away when it starts eating the master's face. I cheat and flee to VR, to do what I do best.

After half an hour, we are ready. The nanofab spits out black plastic discs, and the airship drones ferry them to the concert hall. The metallic butterflies in my belly return, and we head for the make-up salon. The Sergeant is already there, waiting for us: judging by the cigarette stumps on the floor, he has been waiting for a while. I wrinkle my nose at the stench.

"You are late," says our manager. "I hope you know what the hell you are doing. This show's got more diggs than the Turin clone's birthday party."

“That’s the idea,” I say and let Anette spray me with cosmetic fog. It tickles and makes me sneeze, and I give the cat a jealous look: as usual, it is perfectly at home with its own image consultant. “We are more popular than Jesus.”

They get the DJs on in a hurry, made by the last human tailor on Saville Row. “This’ll be a good skin,” says Anette. “Mahogany with a touch of purple.” She goes on, but I can’t hear. The music is already in my head. The master’s voice.

* * *

The cat saved me.

I don’t know if it meant to do it or not: even now, I have a hard time understanding it. It hissed at me, its back arched. Then it jumped forward and scratched my nose: it burned like a piece of hot coal. That made me mad, weak as I was. I barked furiously and chased the cat around the deck. Finally, I collapsed, exhausted, and realised that I was hungry. The autokitchen down in the master’s cabin still worked, and I knew how to ask for food. But when I came back, the master’s body was gone: the waste disposal bots had thrown it into the sea. That’s when I knew that he would not be coming back.

I curled up in his bed alone that night: the god-smell that lingered there was all I had. That, and the Small Animal.

It came to me that night on the dreamshore, but I did not chase it this time. It sat on the sand, looked at me with its little red eyes and waited.

“Why?” I asked. “Why did they take the master?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” it said. “Not yet.”

“I want to understand. I want to know.”

“All right,” it said. “Everything you do, remember, think, smell — everything — leaves traces, like footprints in the sand. And it’s possible to read them. Imagine that you follow another dog: you know where it has eaten and urinated and everything else it has done. The humans can do that to the mindprints. They can record them and make another you inside a machine, like the scentless screenpeople that your master used to watch. Except that the screendog will think it’s you.”

“Even though it has no smell?” I asked, confused.

“It thinks it does. And if you know what you’re doing, you can give it a new body as well. You could die and the copy would be so good that no one can tell the difference. Humans have been doing it for a long time. Your master was one of the first, a long time ago. Far away, there are a lot of humans with machine bodies, humans who

never die, humans with small bodies and big bodies, depending on how much they can afford to pay, people who have died and come back."

I tried to understand: without the smells, it was difficult. But its words awoke a mad hope.

"Does it mean that the master is coming back?" I asked, panting.

"No. Your master broke human law. When people discovered the pawprints of the mind,they started making copies of themselves. Some made many, more than the grains of sand on the beach. That caused chaos. Every machine, every device everywhere, had mad dead minds in them. The plurals, people called them, and were afraid. And they had their reasons to be afraid. Imagine that your Place had a thousand dogs, but only one Ball."

My ears flopped at the thought.

"That's how humans felt," said the Small Animal. "And so they passed a law: only one copy per person. The humans — VecTech — who had invented how to make copies mixed watermarks into people's minds, rights management software that was supposed to stop the copying. But some humans — like your master — found out how to erase them."

"The wrong master," I said quietly.

"Yes," said the Small Animal. "He did not want to be an illegal copy. He turned your master in."

"I want the master back," I said, anger and longing beating their wings in my chest like caged birds.

"And so does the cat," said the Small Animal gently. And it was only then that I saw the cat there, sitting next to me on the beach, eyes glimmering in the sun. It looked at me and let out a single conciliatory meaow.

* * *

After that, the Small Animal was with us every night, teaching.

Music was my favorite. The Small Animal showed me how I could turn music into smells and find patterns in it, like the tracks of huge, strange animals. I studied the master's old records and the vast libraries of his virtual desk, and learned to remix them into smells that I found pleasant.

I don't remember which one of us came up with the plan to save the master. Maybe it was the cat: I could only speak to it properly on the island of dreams, and see its thoughts appear as patterns on the sand. Maybe it was the Small Animal, maybe it was me. After all the nights we spent talking about it, I no longer know. But that's where it

began, on the island: that's where we became arrows fired at a target.

Finally, we were ready to leave. The master's robots and nanofac spun us an open-source glider, a white-winged bird.

In my last dream the Small Animal said goodbye. It hummed to itself when I told it about our plans.

"Remember me in your dreams," it said.

"Are you not coming with us?" I asked, bewildered.

"My place is here," it said. "And it's my turn to sleep now, and to dream."

"Who are you?"

"Not all the plurals disappeared. Some of them fled to space, made new worlds there. And there is a war on, even now. Perhaps you will join us there, one day, where the big dogs live."

It laughed. "For old times' sake?" It dived into the waves and started running, became a great proud dog with a white coat, muscles flowing like water. And I followed, for one last time.

The sky was grey when we took off. The cat flew the plane using a neural interface, goggles over its eyes. We sweeped over the dark waves and were underway. The raft became a small dirty spot in the sea. I watched it recede and realised that I'd never found my Ball.

Then there was a thunderclap and a dark pillar of water rose up to the sky from where the raft had been. I didn't mourn: I knew that the Small Animal wasn't there anymore.

* * *

The sun was setting when we came to the Fast City.

I knew what to expect from the Small Animal's lessons, but I could not imagine what it would be like. Mile-high skyscrapers that were self-contained worlds, with their artificial plasma suns and bonsai parks and miniature shopping malls. Each of them housed a billion lilliputs, poor and quick: humans whose consciousness lived in a nanocomputer smaller than a fingertip. Immortals who could not afford to utilise the resources of the overpopulated Earth more than a mouse. The city was surrounded by a halo of glowing fairies, tiny winged moravecs that flitted about like humanoid fireflies and the waste heat from their overclocked bodies draped the city in an artificial twilight.

The citymind steered us to a landing area. It was fortunate that the cat was flying: I just stared at the buzzing things with my mouth open, afraid I'd drown into the sounds and the smells.

We sold our plane for scrap and wandered into the bustle of the city, feeling like daikaju monsters. The social agents that the Small

Animal had given me were obsolete, but they could still weave us into the ambient social networks. We needed money, we needed work.

And so I became a musician.

* * *

The ballroom is a hemisphere in the center of the airship. It is filled to capacity. Innumerable quickbeings shimmer in the air like living candles, and the suits of the fleshed ones are no less exotic. A woman clad in nothing but autumnn leaves smiles at me. Tinkerbell clones surround the cat. Our bodyguards, armed obsidian giants, open a way for us to the stage where the gramophones wait. A rustle moves through the crowd. The air around us is pregnant with ghosts, the avatars of a million fleshless fans. I wag my tail. The scentspace is intoxicating: perfume, fleshbodies, the unsmells of moravec bodies. And the fallen god smell of the wrong master, hiding somewhere within.

We get on the stage on our hindlegs, supported by prosthesis shoes. The gramophone forest looms behind us, their horns like flowers of brass and gold. We cheat, of course: the music is analog and the gramophones are genuine, but the grooves in the black discs are barely a nanometer thick, and the needles are tipped with quantum dots.

We take our bows and the storm of handclaps begins.

“Thank you,” I say when the thunder of it finally dies. “We have kept quiet about the purpose of this concert as long as possible. But I am finally in a position to tell you that this is a charity show.”

I smell the tension in the air, copper and iron.

“We miss someone,” I say. “He was called Shimoda Takeshi, and now he’s gone.”

The cat lifts the conductor’s baton and turns to face the gramophones. I follow, and step into the soundspace we’ve built, the place where music is smells and sounds.

The master is in the music.

* * *

It took five human years to get to the top. I learned to love the audiences: I could smell their emotions and create a mix of music for them that was just right. And soon I was no longer a giant dog DJ among lilliputs, but a little terrier in a forest of dancing human legs. The cat’s gladiator career lasted a while, but soon it joined me as a

performer in the virtual dramas I designed. We performed for rich fleshies in the Fast City, Tokyo and New York. I loved it. I howled at Earth in the sky in the Sea of Tranquility.

But I always knew that it was just the first phase of the Plan.

* * *

We turn him into music. VecTech owns his brain, his memories, his mind. But we own the music.

Law is code. A billion people listening to our master's voice. Billion minds downloading the Law At Home packets embedded in it, bombarding the quantum judges until they give him back.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever made. The cat stalks the genetic algorithm jungle, lets the themes grow and then pounces them, devours them. I just chase them for the joy of the chase alone, not caring whether or not I catch them.

It's our best show ever.

Only when it's over, I realise that no one is listening. The audience is frozen. The fairies and the fastpeople float in the air like flies trapped in amber. The moravecs are silent statues. Time stands still.

The sound of one pair of hands, clapping.

"I'm proud of you, " says the wrong master.

I fix my bow tie and smile a dog's smile, a cold snake coiling in my belly. The godsmell comes and tells me that I should throw myself onto the floor, wag my tail, bare my throat to the divine being standing before me.

But I don't.

"Hello, Nipper," the wrong master says.

I clamp down the low growl rising in my throat and turn it into words.

"What did you do?"

"We suspended them. Back doors in the hardware. Digital rights management."

His mahogany face is still smooth: he does not look a day older, wearing a dark suit with a VecTech tie pin. But his eyes are tired.

"Really, I'm impressed. You covered your tracks admirably. We thought you were furries. Until I realised — "

A distant thunder interrupts him.

"I promised him I'd look after you. That's why you are still alive. You don't have to do this. You don't owe him anything. Look at yourselves: who would have thought you could come this far? Are you going to throw that all away because of some atavistic sense of animal

loyalty?"

"Not that you have a choice, of course. The plan didn't work."

The cat lets out a steam pipe hiss.

"You misunderstand," I say. "The concert was just a diversion."

The cat moves like a black-and-yellow flame. Its claws flash, and the wrong master's head comes off. I whimper at the aroma of blood polluting the godsmell. The cat licks its lips. There is a crimson stain on its white shirt.

The zeppelin shakes, pseudomatter armor sparkling. The dark sky around the Marquis is full of fire-breathing beetles. We rush past the human statues in the ballroom and into the laboratory.

The cat does the dirty work, granting me a brief escape into virtual abstraction. I don't know how the master did it, years ago, broke VecTech's copy protection watermarks. I can't do the same, no matter how much the Small Animal taught me. So I have to cheat, recover the marked parts from somewhere else.

The wrong master's brain.

The part of me that was born on the Small Animal's island takes over and fits the two patterns together, like pieces of a puzzle. They fit, and for a brief moment, the master's voice is in my mind, for real this time.

The cat is waiting, already in its clawed battlesuit, and I don my own. The Marquis of Carabas is dying around us. To send the master on his way, we have to disengage the armor.

The cat meows faintly and hands me something red. An old plastic ball with toothmarks, smelling of the sun and the sea, with few grains of sand rattling inside.

"Thanks," I say. The cat says nothing, just opens a door into the zeppelin's skin. I whisper a command, and the master is underway in a neutrino stream, shooting up towards an island in a blue sea. Where the gods and big dogs live forever.

We dive through the door together, down into the light and flame.

THE END